



Catholic Diocese of Columbus

Office of the Bishop
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The Vigil of the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary

December 7, 2023

My Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

As the season of Advent begins, we journey with the Blessed Virgin Mary, an expectant mother who faced many challenges, toward the celebration of her only begotten Son. Although many in our Diocese were discouraged by the vote this past November, our commitment to accompanying women and their children continues. In these days that have followed the ballot initiative, some women have contemplated terminating their pregnancies. With renewed effort, we need to make abortion unthinkable, and the birth of a child not to be seen as a burden but a blessing.

Outside the realm of politics, the true victory will come by winning hearts through our unconditional and relentless love for women and their children. Following the November issue, Archbishop Dennis Schnurr, Archdiocese of Cincinnati stated that the result was a sign that our society needed deeper conversion. Sharing the sentiments of Archbishop Schnurr, I began to think of what the Diocese of Columbus could do to continue to build a culture of life and a civilization of love.

First, I encourage all the faithful to a deeper life of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. I was grateful and moved by how many people committed themselves to prayer, the Rosary and Adoration, and Mass during the lead-up to the ballot initiative. It is not that your prayers were ineffective or in vain; rather, God was trying to teach us something according to His time and His plan. Nevertheless, we must not lose our commitment, but rather renew and strengthen it.

To that end, I wish to encourage all pastors, priests, and deacons to make a serious commitment to offering a Holy Hour in the parish church(es), especially on the Thursday before First Friday (or on the First Friday itself) in reparation for sins against human life and dignity, praying also for the building of a civilization of love. The People of God in the Diocese of Columbus, which has been consecrated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, can console the Heart of Jesus and can be inspired to love more generously through this sacred time. The upcoming Jubilee Year, in honor of the 350th anniversary of the apparitions of the Sacred Heart to St. Margaret Mary, is a fitting occasion to begin this initiative.

I also want to encourage all Catholics in the Diocese, at the conclusion of the Christmas Season, to resume the traditional practice of abstinence from meat on Fridays. Catholics are already obliged to either abstain from meat or do some other form of penance every Friday throughout the year. In 2009, the Diocese of Steubenville encouraged the faithful there to abstain from meat on Fridays and to donate what was saved on meals to pro-life charities.

Almsgiving could be tied to this practice. The need to support organizations like the Women's Care Center, Pregnancy Decision Health Centers, Heartbeat International, Birthright, Bottoms Up, and Mommies Matter, has never been greater. Our support of these and like organizations demonstrates our commitment to the good of human life and the care of the least of our brothers and sisters.

The idea behind abstinence from meat on Fridays is not merely external, that is, to keep a rule; rather, it is a form of Christian asceticism. Simply trying to circumvent the discipline by having an extravagant shrimp dinner, for example, defeats the purpose. We ought to do penance as means of encountering Christ in the hope of deeper conversion to Him. We can be intentional in our abstinence and penitential practices, mindful of unborn children, their mothers and fathers, and the men and women in the trenches working to support them. Our Catholic institutions in the Diocese can and should take this discipline into account. What is demanded is not the external rule but a conversion of our mindset and our culture with the hope that we will be more mindful of the child in the womb. In 2011, the Bishops of England and Wales resumed the practice of Friday abstinence from meat; this resumed practice has shown that abstinence from meat is not only beneficial to an individual's health but also is environmentally more friendly. If we abstained from meat on Fridays, we could also raise awareness of our need to care for our "common home".

In addition to these spiritual practices (prayer, abstinence, and almsgiving), the Diocese of Columbus, in the coming year, will be more intentional in its support of a pro-life apostolate. Building upon the good works of the Office for Social Concerns, which cares for a wide spectrum of issues to advance the social mission of the Church, a new Respect Life Office will be dedicated to helping build the culture of life in a sustainable and lasting way, including through formational conferences for pro-life leaders and healthcare workers.

In the coming year, a summit of Respect Life leaders will convene to discover what the many organizations are presently doing, what the true needs are, and how the Diocese can respond to those needs in support of structures that are currently in place. The Holy Father continues to call us to be a Church that listens, and the Diocese of Columbus wants to listen to the experiences of those who work with mothers in need and their families, and to collaborate with Catholic Social Services and other like-minded organizations in meeting the practical needs of families. The Church must also listen to women, particularly those who have experienced the pain of abortion and who need healing. Beginning an apostolate like Project Rachel for healing and reconciliation can help remind people of the Pope's call for us to be a Church of Mercy.

The call to put our faith into action also falls within the realm of evangelization. To proclaim the Good News of salvation is also to proclaim the Gospel of Life. The Office of Evangelization will seek out means to proclaim boldly the entirety of the Gospel message, and the Office of Catholic Schools will continue to promote and foster Catholic academic integration – weaving the Truths of our Faith into all content areas throughout the school program to build a strong culture of life and to form in each student the spirit of radical solidarity that our times demand. For example, in science classes, our students will come to a greater appreciation for the gift of human life at conception and the development of life as a gift in the image and likeness of God. The Diocese of Columbus will organize a pilgrimage to Washington, DC, for the Annual

March for Life in January and will engage our young people in the Vigil for Life and in pro-life events to form them as missionaries, advancing the culture of life, students from all of the Catholic high schools in the Diocese will participate.

God has called us to be a People of Life. The need to build a Culture of Life will take time and patience. It will encounter resistance; nevertheless, we cannot abandon unborn children and their mothers. Law may refuse to recognize the dignity and right to life of the child in the womb, but we cannot be indifferent to the reality. When Mary visited Elizabeth, the child in her womb recognized the Presence of the Savior and leaped for joy. The Church wishes to acknowledge and defend the rights of the unborn child, while accompanying mothers in their time of need and during what should be a joyful time of their lives. May we rise to meet our responsibility, grateful for the gift of life we have received.

Entrusting all of you and these efforts to the intercession of the Mother of God, under the title of the Immaculate Conception, the patroness of the United States, I am,

Sincerely yours in Christ,



Most Reverend Earl K. Fernandes
Bishop of Columbus